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ABSTRACT

A review of the professional literature supports the position that abundant experience with literature has value for young readers. Teachers in the elementary grades stimulate appreciation of literature when (1) their own enthusiasm is evident as they read and discuss books, (2) they regard each pupil as an able reader of and responder about literature, (3) they provide scores of books so excellent that children get lost in reading these books, and (4) they plan ways for children to respond to and discuss books. The goal of the literature discussion should be to further children's companionship and understanding of one another as they react to a shared book. The work of Louise Rosenblatt and others emphasizes the importance of the reader's focus of attention during the reading transaction; their studies explain why all readers attend singularly to different stimuli in books and why this spirited diversity grows by means of enjoyable book discussions that also enhance peer kinship. Sensitive, knowledgeable teachers can, with practice and experience, learn how essential this kind of literary experience is to the growth of appreciative readers. (A framework of teacher observations and children's questions during literary discussions is offered as a means of retrieving and extending children's literary experiences.) (RL)

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Literary Experience, A Neglected Essential

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Literary Experience*, A Neglected Essential

A review of the professional literature supports the position that abundant experience with literature has value for young readers. Literary experience in this paper refers to an appreciation of literature so positive that children seek the experience again. It is hypothesized that discussion nurtures literary experience. The teacher's role in facilitating literary discussions and the nature of children's responses during these discussions are clarified in this paper. Teachers stimulate the appreciation of literary works, encourage individual literary experiences, invite the sharing of one's opinions in informal discussions, and teach pupils to voice and defend their personal reactions to a literary work while taking delight in the many ways that authors "influence" different readers.

The value of abundant literary experience in the elementary school reading program has been a recurring and virtually undisputed theme in the professional literature. It has been widely acknowledged again and again that meritorious children's books contribute to meaningful reading time. Respected educators have stated repeatedly with emphasis that wide reading of freely selected children's books is crucial in forming positive attitudes toward reading, toward books, and toward the development of avid adult readers (Koeller, 1981). Some (Sorenson, 1976) have even claimed that when basal reading activities are abandoned in favor of reading activities utilizing children's literature books, problem readers make reading gains of 1-3 years and show increased determination, confidence, and preference for reading at school and home.

Teachers play a major role in bringing children and noteworthy books

* with due appreciation to Louise Rosenblatt

together in ways more meaningful than the "worksheet-workbook-ritual" so much in evidence today. For many of today's children, reading periods consist of completing worksheets and workbook pages rather than understanding an author's meaning and story craft (Durkin, 1978-1979). In classrooms where the teaching of literature is an important goal, Gellis (1977) indicates heavy reliance on study guide questions. Reliance upon worksheets, workbooks, and study guide questions may not evoke high levels of literary experience because enthusiasm for reading may diminish if the child is "tested" following the reading. Also, worksheets, workbooks, study guide questions, and related assignments like book reports may become hum-drum, particularly if lower cognitive questions are the only kinds routinely answered.

Major challenges face reading teachers as they strive to provide a wealth of books so tempting that interested children not only read but reread them, and then, strive to encourage children to interact in their reaction to these books, both during reading and after reading a story. Experts (Rosenblatt, 1968; Greene, 1980) believe that when books are discussed informally, with a friend or the teacher, in terms of each reader's own unique interpretations and relevant experiences, increased meaning is brought to the reading. Literary experience is enhanced and reading interest is increased when children interact in discussions that explore their reaction to the story. It seems that in discussions where personal reactions surface and private observations are voiced, rather than the worksheet-workbook-ritual, the reading experience not only makes more sense to participating children, but their literary experience grows.

Teachers stimulate appreciation of literature when their own enthusiasm is evident as they read and discuss books. Cameron (1981) emphasizes

the importance of pupils having enjoyable experiences in listening to convincing recordings of poetry and prose, and he believes that reading aloud well is a crucial skill for English teachers.

Teachers further stimulate literary appreciation when they regard each pupil as an able reader of and responder about literature. Purves (1980) notes that even preschoolers develop strategies for reading literary texts and for talking and writing about these. Children learn what the structure and rules are of a story or a poem. They also learn the kind of talk or writing that best expresses their intellectual or emotional grasp of what they read, and they can communicate that grasp to others. Purves states that children move from a terse, "I like it; it's funny" to an elaborated interpretation of a text. He refers to the growing professional knowledge about this and suggests that more research must be done on how these various strategies are learned. He believes that teachers can help students by talking with them about their reading: How stories affect them, how language, tone, and structure impact, what stories can mean, and how stories might be judged and why.

Teachers stimulate literary experience by providing scores of books so excellent that children get lost in reading these books. And when this happens, whatever extra time it takes for the child to be able to put the book down must be provided. (Pity the child or adult who has never experienced staying up through the night with a book so good you couldn't put it down but made you slow down in the last chapters because you really didn't want it to end). Benton (1979) mentions the Secondary World of reading, that world created when the reader is so involved in reading a book that (s)he is oblivious to the demands of the Primary World. He explains why involvement in reading varies; it shifts because it depends upon the

degree of anticipation of what will happen based upon one's retrospective knowledge of the story so far. Benton believes that literature is important to all of us because image making is the mode of our untutored thinking and stories are its earliest product. He cites both Susanne Langer, who said that stories are the mind's stock in trade, and Barbara Hardy, who said we tell stories because nature, not art, makes us all storytellers.

And finally, teachers stimulate appreciation of books when they plan ways for children to respond to and discuss books. A child's unsolicited response about a book can lead to an informal literature discussion. Children are likely to respond in a literature discussion and share their personal appreciation (or lack of) of stories if the discussion atmosphere invites them to think or fantasize or imagine freely about this experience. Benton (1979) feels that the subject of the reader's response is a "Loch Ness Monster" because the nature and dimensions of the response phenomenon remain cloudy. This is so, he argues, despite excellent insights like the N.C.T.E. sponsored research in the 1960's into the process that children go through in reading literature, and the noteworthy work of Squire and Purves on responses that provided detailed schemata concerning the stated responses of readers.

Teachers need to set time aside to induce children to relax, explore, and respond to literature. Petrosky (1980) implores us to realize that

> Books are worlds. Books are experiences. Children need to talk with each other and with teachers about their encounters with those worlds, those experiences. We would do well to minimize our expectations of quick answers and fast responses. Meaning comes slowly. Beginning response is a mediated process and not always coherent. We need to encourage children to talk

> to us and to each other about what they see, feel, think, and how they associate with what they read. We need to probe and help students elaborate and clarify when they seem muddled... I also suggest we stop limiting children's reading experiences to things they find familiar and let them explore the unknown through books. (p. 155)

Picture books, appreciated by even the very youngest, offer marvelous opportunities to explore unknown worlds and broaden reading interests. Literary experience deepens when children volunteer their responses to a story. Individual impressions about stories are proof of the truism that, when responding to a book, no single reader has the ultimate insight. Responses will differ; all are equally valid because readers respond personally to books. Children may cherish books that even dear friends reject. Discussion enables children to gain insights into how others respond to the story, and consequently, their own perceptions and awarenesses of story elements may sharpen.

Literature discussions remain active only if pupil response is regarded highly and children receive encouragement in clarifying their own and other children's responses. Pupils volunteer impressions, fantasies, images, and hunches as these are valued by both the teacher and peers. Respecting individual "free-associating" responses acknowledges that one's perspectives and focus, if different, are esteemed. Teachers can guide children to substantiate their reactions to the story and its parts with "evidence" from the story as they continually seek to understand their own and peer responses. Experts (Green, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1968; Bracken, 1968; Salesi, 1978; Cohen, 1968) agree that the level of literary experience is raised in discussions of this kind. Teachers can increase appreciation and awareness of the

sphere of literature books.

The literary discussion is for the children's fellowship more than for any exhaustive analysis or categorizing. Benton (1979) calls for an informal dialogue between a few subjects who try to empathize with and understand each reader's personal recreations of the text rather than to pigeonhole, experiment, or codify responses. He asks that we avoid petrifying responses in "classifier's stone" because the heavy machinery of content analysis and the quantifying of stated responses risks undiscriminating inclusiveness. Nobody, he says, benefits from a descriptive conclusion full of inert data about what happens in reading literature while missing the living quality of the psychic process.

The goal, then, of the literature discussion is to further companionship via understanding of one another as we react to a shared book. This suggests that only certain kinds of reading can be the focal point of a literary discussion. Rosenblatt's (1980) transactional theory of reading distinguishes between aesthetic and efferent listening and reading. Aesthetic reading is the kind that occurs because it offers immediate rewards and has its own value to the reader. She says that

> The atmosphere and circumstances of aesthetic reading should make the young reader feel free to pay attention to what is being lived through under guidance of the text. There should also be the opportunity, if desired, to talk freely about the experience with peers and with the teacher. Some teachers have made the literary experience the center not only of discusssions, but also of other activities, utilizing music, paintings, creative dramatics, and writing...There is a danger that literary texts may be used mainly as a medium for generating other

activities. Hence the need to make sure that follow-up activities are such as to maintain connection with the lived-through evocation which is the poem or story. (p. 393)

Rosenblatt (1980) discusses the importance of the reader's focus of attention during the reading transaction. In efferent reading, the reader's attention is focused mainly upon data to be retained after the reading, like scanning the yellow pages for an airline number or paraphrasing the objective meaning. Aesthetic reading combines affect or feeling with cognition to result in a personally lived-through, experienced meaning. She emphasizes that reading instruction in most elementary schools is predominately efferent, and she wonders if the ability to read aesthetically is actually being developed. A child, she says, needs aesthetic reading that fosters exploring sensibilities; otherwise, the child's attention to the sensuous, affective, and associational aspects of his/her reading experiences may be stifled or weakened.

Benton (1979) also describes a reader's focus of attention during the act of reading. His "reading state" is one where the reader is active (not passively filling time) and is creatively generating a "secondary world" in his imagination, much like an "armchair actor" might build a mental stage for those events, scenes and people in the book being read. Each reader has a unique experience, and even rereadings of the same text are never the same even though the words on the page remain unchanged. This is because it is only the reader's imaginative participation that changes. For Benton, readers are analogical because they have a tendency to compose stories based upon the ones they read. When readers parallel a story with anecdotes of their own, that is one way they assimilate the meaning of the story. To Benton, genuine aesthetic response is the constant

interplay between the book and movement within the reader's conscious/unconscious and controlled/regressive elements. This movement accounts for the continuous fluctuations in the degree of the reader's attention to the text.

Iser (1978) explains the fluctuations in a reader's focus of attention by referring to the "moving viewpoint" of a story. He illustrates this with a metaphor from Fielding, Scott, and others that likens the reader to a stage coach traveler who makes a sometimes difficult journey through a story by looking out from his moving viewpoint. This involves combining all that is viewed with what is in one's memory. What the viewer reports depends partly on the amount of attention focused upon each phase of the journey. Of importance is the fact that the viewer never has a total view of the journey at once.

Rosenblatt, Benton, and Iser offer the above explanations for why all readers attend singularly to different stimuli in books. Even readers who have much in common in other ways respond heterogeneously to literature. For example, during a recent gathering of reading educators, a discussion about Mary of Mile 18 (Blades, 1971) revealed spirited diversity. Some discussants considered the book in terms of literary understanding: "The language is stark;" "The text is bland." Others responded in terms of emotional experiences: "I keep thinking of my own child, and how he would have felt;" "I feel so sorry for how misunderstood and lonely Mary was." Still others responded in terms of comprehension: "The reality of their lives demanded that the father act that way;" "Mary knew the rules and why she had to obey them." And some responses were given in terms of preferences and attitudes: "I got cold just reading that book because I remember how cold the winters there really are."

Literary experience flourishes in discussions like this. Iser's (1978) cautions for literary critics extend into guidelines for classroom literature discussions: The object in discussions is not to explain a literary work but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects. Clarifying the potential of a text helps one to avoid falling into the fatal trap of imposing one meaning on the reader. Readers, he believes, must make correct judgments for themselves, because there is no right, or at least best, interpretation. Iser insists that readers judge, but critics merely elucidate:

> As is evident from the variety of responses to modern art or to literary works down through the ages, an interpreter can no longer claim to teach the reader the meaning of the text, for without a subjective contribution and a context, there is no such thing. Far more instructive will be an analysis of what actually happens when one is reading a text, for that is when the text begins to unfold its potential; it is in the reader that the text comes to life, and this is true even when the meaning has become so historical that it is no longer relevant to us. In reading we are able to experience things that no longer exist and to understand things that are totally unfamiliar to us. (p. 19)

Cautions are also provided by Rosenblatt (1980):

1. Do not generate an efferent stance when presenting texts as poems or stories or plays.
2. Do not use the texts being read aesthetically for the explicit teaching of reading skills.
3. Do not preface aesthetic reading with requests for information or analysis that require predominately efferent reading.

4. Do not hurry the young reader away from the lived-through aesthetic experience by too quickly demanding summaries, paraphrases, character analyses, explanations of broad themes.
5. Do not hurry the young reader into substituting literary terminology or definitions for the lived-through work. (Not so long ago, we were reading articles about "literary criticism" of that sort in the second and third grades! Fortunately, I don't think the notion "took" in those grades.) (p. 392)

Rosenblatt suggests that once pupils have experienced appreciation of literature for its own sake, they can be guided toward more formal literary analysis, criticism, and interpretation but these may come even years later.

With a reservoir of story discussions, children begin to compare and contrast elements from previous stories because these now belong to their experiential background. Each discussion illuminates varied responses, enabling pupils to attend and react to a broader spectrum of stimuli. The framework *in figure 1-not a "classifier's stone" but a suggested way to retrieve and extend responses-recognizes that readers respond personally to stories. Cells on the framework share equal importance and may facilitate understanding of a response. Children may use the framework as a guide for asking questions or finding confirmation in the story to elucidate one's hypotheses, fantasies, or interpretations. Children can learn to ask each other questions that illuminate answers, provide details, explore reasoning, clarify obscurities, and explain what makes them speculate.

*The framework combines the works of several previous authors: Young (1967) believes that response to literature occurs in four areas similar to those in this framework. Felsenthat (1978) suggests that the three specified story elements are basic to most fiction. The questions have been compiled by the author with due appreciation to Rosenblatt, 1968; Holmes, undated; Bloom, 1956; Smith and Barrett, 1974; and Johnson and Singleton, 1964.

In figure 1, higher cognitive questions are some examples of the ways that pupils can expand discussion when they feel that a particular response needs more sharing. Rosenblatt (1980) suggests that questions and responses should lead the reader back into the text to savor the story once again. Pupils can seek to ask predominately higher cognitive questions. Results of a recent meta-analysis (Redfield and Rousseau, 1981) of experimental research on teacher questioning behavior show that achievement gains result when there is a predominate use of higher cognitive questions (most closely corresponding to the levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in Bloom's taxonomy) that assume a predominate role during classroom instruction. Those lower cognitive or convergent questions calling for verbatim recall or recognition of factual information (most closely corresponding to the levels of knowledge and comprehension in Bloom's taxonomy) do not have the same positive effect on student achievement. Petrosky (1980) indicates that he has seen children using the Socratic method thoroughly discuss the Junior Great Books. Children, he says, are able to participate in the world of figurative language and master some of the literary conventions like plot, theme, and characterization when they are taught how to do so and given the opportunity to do so.

When children discuss their reactions to literature, they begin to understand the responses of the other discussants. When the teacher supplies his/her opinions as well, children observe active adult responses to literature. Greene (1980) suggests that:

> (the teacher) needs sufficient knowledge to talk intelligently. She needs to know how to frame questions, how to stimulate the

> kinds of interchange which permit individuals to see what others have discovered in a text and thereby to widen their own visions of what is possible. (p. 661)

Pupils can grow in their ability to voice and defend their personal literary responses while taking delight in the many ways that authors "influence" each individual reader. They come to understand Hobsbaum's concept of availability, (Iser, 1978) which deals with the notion that even the most gifted writer does not have available his total experience, and, by extension, even to the most appreciative reader the writer's total work is unavailable.

Children learn that stories communicate something. However, the very diversity of children means that any book cannot represent "the single truth" but can succeed, perhaps, in communicating "a partial truth" to each reader, according to Iser (1978). He notes that literature, like modern art and pop art, is reacting against the notion that a text must be interpreted to uncover any hidden meanings; instead, quality is integral rather than in translation to any referential meaning. Literature, he emphasizes, offers us an opportunity to experience for ourselves the author's work. And, most important, literature nudges us to learn about things, learn about ourselves, so we can stretch and grow.

Conclusion. The ultimate test of successful literary experience and reading instruction is whether children read by choice, of their own free will in their own free time; whether children listen eagerly when books are read to them; and whether children respond to a story they say they liked by sharing their opinions and feelings about it. Enjoyable book discussions can nurture literary experience and widen the warm circle of peer kinship. Sensitive, knowledgeable teachers can, with practice and

experience, learn how essential this kind of literary experience is to the growth of appreciative readers.

A Sampling of:

Teacher's Observations During Discussion		Children's Questions During Discussion		
The Child's Response: Literary Understanding	Does a child develop appreciation of literature criticism? Does a child habitually compare info with previous readings? Are there insights into the literary craft of the story? Does child volunteer how the author influenced him/her; determine if writing is effective; identify styles?	What did the author do to help you understand this character? How would you evaluate the depth/realism/ description of the character?	What did the author do to raise your interest? How would you evaluate the structure of the plot and the story form?	How would you evaluate authenticity of setting, time, viewpoint; interaction between text-illustrations; use words and figurative language? What additional reading might increase your understanding of this story? Can you explain how the author influenced your reaction?
Emotional Experiences	Are self insights and new understandings promoted? Is there imaging and exploring of feelings about the story? Does child volunteer his/her emotional reactions to the story?	Did you identify with characters; judge worth of characters? Did you know anybody like the character?	Did you identify with the problem; how would you compare and contrast to today's contemporary hour? Can you apply this to a situation in your life?	Did you identify with mood, setting, time, viewpoint? Have you ever felt that way? How did you feel during the reading of the story Can you explain why you reacted to this story as you did?
Comprehension	Does child derive meaning from the story? Is there spontaneous discussion and critical reaction to the story? Does child volunteer his/her interpretations of the story and locate reasonable defense if necessary?	Can you recognize traits of characters; interpret actions, feelings, motivations of characters? Would you have behaved differently if you had been that character?	Were the theme and sequence of events recognizable? How would you have handled it?	Can you recognize the viewpoint of who tells the story, the purpose in telling it, and the time, location, mood, and tone? Can you explain your interpretations of the story? How would the story differ if you were the author and were writing it today?
Preferences/ Attitudes	What works with a particular child at this time in this place? Does child share opinions and attitudes? Does child volunteer his/her interests, values, impressions?	What did this character remind you of? Do you enjoy reading about people like this?	What do you already know about this? What new things did you learn? What was confusing?	Is this the kind of story that you find interesting? What is there to remember about this story? Will you remember it? Were you involved in this story?
		Character	Action-Plot-Problem	Setting-Mood

The Story's Elements

Figure 1.

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